

SECTION SIX: General Government Services



BENCHMARK INCORPORATED

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Planning, Community Development and Management

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Catawba County government provides its citizens with a wide range of services, some that are used by the general populace and some that serve only a certain sector of persons in the County. This Section will concentrate primarily on those services that are broad in client base and those that are especially affected by growth and new development. For the purposes of this Report, the municipal services are only described in general. The emphasis here is on services provided either only to unincorporated areas or to those provided to all County residents.

Library Overview

There are five public libraries located in and operated by Catawba County. The Central/Main Library, located in the City of Newton, is the primary facility in the area. There are four branches located in Maiden, Sherrills Ford, Mountain View/Southwest, and St. Stephens. The City of Hickory also operates two municipal libraries: Patrick Beaver near downtown Hickory and the Ridgeview Library in the Ridgeview community.

The Central/Main Library was built in the late 1970s and is located at 115 West ‘C’ Street in Newton. This is a 30,000 square foot facility and is operated by a staff of twenty-one. There are four branch libraries that have been built since the construction of the main facility. The Maiden Branch was built at 11 South ‘A’ Avenue in the early nineties and is a 2,800 square foot structure. The Sherrills Ford Branch was constructed around 1980 at 8456 Sherrills Ford Road. This branch has one full time staff member who also serves as its branch head. This is a 2,675 square foot facility. The Mountain View/Southwest Branch has a full time staff of four. This 7,965 square foot branch was opened in the mid 1990s at 2944 Highway 127 South in Hickory. Also in the mid 1990s the 9,035 square foot St. Stephens Branch Library was built. This facility is operated with a full time staff of four. This building is located at 3225 Springs Road in Hickory. Additionally, the County contributed \$170,757 in FY98/99 to the City of Hickory for the new Patrick Beaver Library. Although there have been discussions concerning the merging of the two systems, the City of Hickory has expressed its desire to keep its library system as an independent entity.

Library Comparisons & Analysis

The total service population for the entire County library system is approximately 98,308 residents. This is in addition to, and does not include, Hickory’s service area of 32,769 people which is served by the City of Hickory library system. According to the County Library Director, each of the libraries have a targeted three mile service area radius. These service areas are loosely defined as the distance in which a library patron will consistently drive to use a facility. Two high-growth areas, the northeastern quadrant (Oxford area) and

the Sherrills Ford area, either do not have a convenient library branch (located within three miles) or have one that is approaching its capacity. The increased demand in these two areas will grow over time as residential development continues. There are several proposed bookmobile sites that have been designated by the Catawba County Library System that would help provide services to those areas not within three miles of a library branch.

Although the County may be lacking in at least one service area when compared to other counties of similar size (based on 1996 population totals) it is found that Catawba reflects favorably in the total number of libraries and total square footage.

Table 6.1
County Library Comparison

County	1996 Population	Central Library	Branches	System-wide Square Footage	Total Circulation	Number of Bookmobiles
Union	102,083	1	3	32,600	448,069	0
Johnston	99,215	1	6	36,419	310,686	1
Catawba	95,537	1	4	52,475	620,163	0
Iredell	92,733	1	0	20,205	472,897	1
Rockingham	89,250	0	7	49,275	509,708	1

Source: Five-Year Statewide Survey, State Library of North Carolina

Library Analysis

Some funding (\$200,000) has been allocated in FY1999-2000 for a genealogical services renovation and the possibility of moving the law library from the Government Center to the Main Library. These renovations would allow more room for these services and prevent further overcrowding in the main facility. Other capital projects include the acquisition of a commercial software application that would bring the library system up to the most modern technological standard. This project is scheduled to last approximately eighteen months and \$250,000 has been budgeted in FY 98/99 and \$100,000 in FY 99/00.

However, aside from the aforementioned scheduled improvements, there are discrepancies between some of the County's apparent needs and the CIP (Capital Improvement Program). By using the Library Director's targeted three-mile service radius, there appears to be a lack of library service in the northeastern quadrant of the County. This lack of service will become more glaring as this area continues to grow. Furthermore, the expressed need for reinstatement of the Bookmobile program is not budgeted. In order to improve certain library services, additional funding for library needs should be explored. Other alternatives such as cooperative municipal/County approaches to library services should also be considered.

Fire Protection

There are 17 Fire Districts in the County, each comprised of both volunteer and paid staff. The Hickory Fire Department is the County's largest, most heavily equipped department. It also provides fire protection services to the most people. The Hickory F.D. is made up of 83% paid personnel and 17% volunteers. The Newton, Conover and Long View fire departments have the next three largest paid staffs although none of these department's have paid staff that represents more than 30% of the total departmental personnel. The remainder of the County is provided with fire protection by almost exclusively volunteer staffs.

The Insurance Services Organization (ISO) provides insurance ratings for all fire districts in North Carolina. A rating of 1 is the best, 10 is the worst. A split rating (e.g., 6/9) means that the district as a whole is rated one way, with portions rated differently (usually better). This is particularly common in areas closest to municipalities or in large districts where part is rural and part is in an urbanizing area. The level of water service available for firefighting purposes is the primary factor in determining ISO ratings. Please note that in the following table the 1998-1999 tax rate is much lower for those departments located outside of municipal limits. The primary reason for this low number is the fact that the large majority of the fire fighters are volunteers. Only the Hickory Fire Department has more paid personnel than volunteers.

Table on Following Page.

Table 6.2
Catawba County Fire Departments Summary

Department	Paid Personnel	Volunteers	ISO Rating	1998-99 Tax Rate
Bandys	0	52	8	\$0.0400
Catawba	0	31	5 / 9	\$0.0700
Claremont	1	36	5 / 9	\$0.0700
Conover	8	36	5 / 9	\$0.0350
Cookesville	0	27	9	\$0.0600
Denver	1	26	6 / 9	\$0.0400
Hickory FD	112	23	2 / 9	\$0.2850
Long View	7	26	5 / 9	\$0.0760
Maiden	1	38	4 / 9	\$0.0425
Mountain View	1	37	5 / 9	\$0.0475
Newton	13	35	5 / 9	\$0.0500
Propst	0	48	9	\$0.0650
Sherrills Ford	1	44	9	\$0.0420
St. Stephens	1	28	6	\$0.0500
Startown	0	29	9	\$0.0500
Icard	1	35	5 / 9	\$0.0500
Totals	147	551	NA	NA

Source: Catawba County Emergency Management Department, 1998. *Note: Some districts include both municipal and rural fire service usually due to annexation agreements with rural fire department (shaded districts above). Municipal resident typically will not pay additional fire taxes.*

Portions of the City of Hickory have the best ISO ratings (2) in the County. The Town of Maiden has portions with a four rating. Newton, Conover, Long View, Claremont, Mountain View, Icard and Catawba each have ratings of five.

Calls to one of the fire departments, EMS calls and calls for rescue assistance have generally been increasing over the past few years. Unlike the steady upward increase in law enforcement calls, fire and rescue calls (and to a lesser degree EMS calls) have been a bit more erratic from year to year since 1994. Among other factors, the peaks and valleys in fire and rescue activity can be attributed to extreme weather occurrences (or lack thereof) in a

given year. This year-to-year pattern does not minimize the fact that EMS, fire and rescue calls have collectively increased more than 36% from 1994-1997.

Table 6.3
Calls For Service; Fire Departments,
Emergency Medical Services & Rescue Squads; Catawba County, 1994-97.

	1994	1995	94-95 change	1996	95-96 change	1997	96-97 change
Fire Calls	3,508	3,650	4.05%	4,391	20.30%	3,991	-9.11%
EMS Calls	12,380	13,903	12.30%	14,774	6.26%	15,935	7.86%
Rescue Calls	4,280	4,170	-2.57%	4,601	10.34%	3,994	-13.19%

Source: Catawba County Communications Center, 1998.

EMS Service

Emergency Medical Services are provided to all Catawba County residents on a fee-for-service basis. The fees represent a portion (targeted at 50%) of the costs with the remainder coming from the County's general fund. The County is divided into six EMS Service Districts, each with a single EMS base. According to the EMS Director, the preferred range of EMS service in Catawba County is 4 miles. The absolute greatest distance that an ambulance or rescue vehicle should travel to an emergency scene is 5 miles. Several of the EMS districts are 4-mile districts. All Catawba County EMS districts are 5-mile districts except for Catawba which spans from the northern and northeast County lines to south of the Town of Catawba into areas of Sherrills Ford. The distance to the south, east and west from the Catawba Base (located in the Town of Catawba) is not a problem. However, the distance to the north is an issue that will likely need to be addressed in the near future. The distance from the Catawba County Base to the new Riverbend Park (which is located in this district) is almost eight (8) miles (twice the preferred distance).

General county-wide response times for EMS calls for service are shown in the table in the Fire Protection section. Specific response times for EMS service by EMS base vary widely by service district and by the number of calls that are taken. The average, typical County-wide response time is just under 8 minutes. Response times in the EMS districts of St. Stephens, Sherrills Ford, Propst and Hickory are all below the county-wide average. Response times in the Newton EMS District run between 8.5 and 9 minutes. Response times in Catawba are typically between 9.5 and 10.5 minutes.

Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

All of Catawba County's unincorporated areas are served with law enforcement services and police protection through the County Sheriff's Department. Each of the eight municipalities operates a police department with varying levels of service. All law enforcement agencies in the County work closely together and all have mutual aid agreements with other departments. The Sheriff's Department currently has 99 full-time sworn personnel and 14 full-time non-sworn personnel. A maximum of 64 full-time officers are available for calls (this figure excludes certain personnel - mostly communications, jail and court - that cannot be pulled off the job to respond to emergencies). A maximum of 38 officers are available for calls in a given day.

The Sheriff's Department provides a wide range of services including the following Divisions: Administration (7 full-time equivalent staffers), Civil Law Enforcement (7), Road Patrols (30), Resource Officers (6), Communications (24), Crime Prevention (4), Narcotics (5), Investigations (9), Lake Patrol (2), Court Security (6), Newton Detention (20) and House Arrest (1).

All police/law enforcement calls in Catawba County are filtered through the Catawba County Communications Center in Newton. Officers in unincorporated areas and in all municipalities (except Hickory and Newton) are dispatched directly from this Center. Calls for service in Hickory or Newton are transferred from the County Center to those city's dispatch centers for referral to the needed officer.

Calls for police/law enforcement service have steadily increased since 1994. In the four years from 1994-1997 Catawba County has experienced a collective 60 percent increase in calls for service to both the Sheriff's Department and to the municipal police forces (excluding Newton and Hickory).

Table 6.4
Calls For Service, Sheriff's Department, Selected Police Departments*

	1994	1995	94-95 change	1996	95-96 change	1997	96-97 change
Sheriff Calls	29,710	33,747	13.59%	40,019	18.59%	51,148	27.81%
Police Calls*	14,282	15,171	6.22%	18,012	18.73%	24,297	34.89%

Source: Catawba County Communications Center, 1998. *Note: Police Calls includes all but those from Hickory, Newton and Sheriff's Department.

As Catawba County becomes more urban, crime will likely become more of a problem. The 1995 crime rate in Catawba County was 54.7 (major crimes committed per 1,000 population) ranking the County 20th in North Carolina. This has improved from a 15th ranking in 1980. However, the prison admission rate has been steadily increasing since 1980 when the County ranked 66th in the State. In 1995, it ranked 25th with 4.1 prison admissions per 1,000 population. Because Catawba County is a major regional employment and entertainment center, a significant number of crimes are committed here by non-residents. Unfortunately, these offenders must be processed through Catawba County courts and housed in Catawba County jails. This creates a unique burden on the local criminal justice system.

As shown in the following tables, crime rates have risen with the growing population of the County. Of the major offenses recorded by the Sheriff's Office, only homicides and breaking & entering charges have dropped. Otherwise, each category has either remained constant or increased. Arson, aggravated assault, and drug violations have risen the most drastically. However, the overall number of offenses has grown by approximately eight percent between 1996 and 1998, keeping it fairly consistent with the County's recent growth percentages.

Table 6.5
Crime Trends - 1994-1998

Offenses	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	94-98% Change
Homicide	6	2	0	3	4	-33%
Rape	17	19	18	15	17	0%
Robbery	16	8	12	17	16	0%
Aggravated Assault	62	27	36	44	85	37%
Breaking & Entering	642	623	718	570	634	-1%
Larceny	930	1035	1028	1000	1166	25%
Arson	4	4	8	9	20	400%
Weapons Violations	n/a	n/a	64	60	78	2%
Sex Offenses	n/a	n/a	79	73	86	9%
Drug Violations	n/a	n/a	78	135	130	67%
Total Offenses (All)	n/a	n/a	3952	3872	4275	8% (1996-1998% change)

Source: Catawba County Sheriff's Office

The most startling statistic for the County is the percentage of juvenile arrests between 1996 and 1998. During this time the number of juvenile arrests rose by 1440%, from 22 in 1996 to 339 in 1998. If this number continues to rise, and as the juveniles become adults, the County may be faced with higher arrest statistics in the future.

Table 6.6
Arrests 1996-1998

Arrests	1996	1997	1998	96-98% Change
Male Adult	1854	1705	1994	8%
Female Adult	368	389	438	19%
Juvenile	22	167	339	1440%
Total	2244	2485	2985	33%

Source: Catawba County Sheriff's Office

One primary area of improvement since 1996 is the value of stolen and damaged property. This decrease comes despite the higher number of arson offenses, which are typically higher in monetary damages. In addition, the County has successfully recovered almost twice the monetary amount that was regained in 1996 and 1997.

Table 6.7
Stolen or Damaged Property Values 1996-1998

Property Value	1996	1997	1998	96-98% Change
Larceny Stolen	\$887,096	\$639,530	\$772,097	-13%
Burglary Stolen	\$1,057,180	\$420,250	\$836,223	-21%
Criminal Damage	\$471,651	\$254,331	\$424,351	-10%
Total	\$2,415,927	\$1,314,111	\$2,032,671	-16%
Property Recovered	\$464,403	\$313,871	\$901,218	94%

Source: Catawba County Sheriff's Office

As described in the Transportation Section, traffic accidents in Catawba County are up and continue to rise. The County's traffic accident rate of 37.9 accidents per 1,000 population is fourth in the State (up from 7th in 1980). With growth and new development, traffic increases, as do accidents. Of course many of these accidents were within municipalities where the most congestions occurs. Nevertheless, the problem affects all County citizens in higher insurance and diminished quality of life.

Recently, one of the temporary concerns facing Catawba County was the clear lack of local jail space. In October 1998 the Newton Detention Facility was 33% over capacity (130 inmates in a facility with a capacity of 98). For a short period of time, the County had a limited capacity allotment (35 inmates) at the Burke-Catawba District Confinement Facility (BCDCF). However, this has recently been resolved with the allotment of significant additional space at the BCDCF. It appears that jail capacity should be adequate for several more years.

The recent closure of the Hickory Jail facility has created some of the demand that is currently a problem in Newton. Increasing incarcerations for various other reasons also have contributed. The decision to close the Hickory facility was primarily based on safety and security reasons. It was determined that the extra inmate capacity in this facility was simply not worth the risks involved in keeping it open.

Animal Control

As the population of the County has grown, obviously so has the population of its family pets. In many cases this means more calls for the Animal Control Department. However, this department has actually seen a decrease in the number of dogs admitted, a rise in the number returned and/or adopted and a decrease in the number euthanized. On the other hand, the County has seen a significant increase in the number of cats admitted to the shelters. Although the numbers returned and/or adopted are also up, the significant increase has also caused many more to be euthanized. Although the number of dogs admitted is down, the number of calls made by the Animal Control Department have risen. Between FY1992 and FY1997 the total number of admitted animals, and therefore activity by the department, has risen 6.7%.

Planning/Zoning Services

Catawba County has been a regional leader in implementing land use controls. Its administration of zoning and subdivision ordinances is unparalleled in the Unifour. This certainly serves as a plus for new residential and industrial investment because of the stability and certainty such regulations create for the development community.

Over the past decade, the Planning and Zoning Department has seen a significant increase in residential subdivision activity with only a few slow years (1994 and 1995). From 1991-1997 the department administratively approved more than 200 minor subdivisions each year except 1996 (183 approved). During the years 1995 and 1996 alone, the Department processed nearly 70 final subdivisions that were approved by the Planning Board. Well over 1,000 zoning compliance permits were issued each year from 1991-97. Annual rezoning requests during the same time frame have been between 11 and 17.

The County recently created a Subdivision Review Board to address the level of subdivision activity that the County Planning Board was experiencing. This new Board will free some of the Planning Board's time for other planning functions, some of which will result from the recommendations of this Plan. The 'Land Use and Development Section' explores these activities further.

Building Inspections

As described in the 'Land Use and Development' section, Catawba County building permit activity has been steadily rising over the past decade. From 1990 to 1998 the number of total permits (residential and non-residential) issued annually increased by 63%. The average annual growth rate in all permits issued during this time frame has been around 8%.

The number of miles traveled by Catawba County inspectors has also risen although much of this increase in travel time is due to a change in administrative procedures rather than actual building growth. Part of the increases in inspection time and travel time involved a move to single discipline inspections (mechanical, plumbing, electrical, etc.) and away from the 'generalist inspector' approach (single inspector inspecting all aspects of a single project from beginning to end). This change was made to better serve the public in a more timely, efficient manner.

Garbage Collection, Recycling and Waste Disposal

Each of the eight municipalities (either in-house or by contract) provides curbside garbage collection, recycling and waste disposal services to its residents. Residents in unincorporated areas of Catawba County are offered service on a fee basis through franchised curbside collection or by using five 'convenience centers' located throughout the County. Catawba County operates a compliant subtitle D cell landfill (commonly called the 'Blackburn Landfill') off Rocky Ford Road, south of Highway 10. This landfill has been renovated to meet new environmental guidelines and now has a projected available capacity through 2010 (the landfill's first phase will carry the County through March, 2002). Beyond 2010, new land will likely need to be purchased (near the current site or elsewhere) for expanded capacity. The County is currently working on a twenty year Solid Waste Master Plan which will analyze the existing facilities and provide options for when the existing landfill is over capacity.

The County also operates a construction and demolition landfill at the Blackburn site. This facility collects the waste generated from construction, land clearing and other such activities. This facility is projected to have an operating life of fifteen years or possibly twenty years with some waste reduction after which a new site will need to be located.

The Solid Waste Management Program operates under an Enterprise Fund that is essentially self-supporting. In other words, the program is generally recovered entirely by user fees.

The County has been working since 1992 to maintain a stable recycling program. Currently the County is recycling approximately 25% of its residential waste (11% of total waste). Through a private contractor, the County offers curbside collection of recyclables. Approximately 92% of residential customers participate in curbside recycling. The above-mentioned “convenience centers” also offer recycling collection bins for public use.

In 1996, approximately sixty-six percent of the waste stream in the County was generated by non-residential sources. The largest generators in the County in 1996 were Siecor (estimated 4,134 tons), Progressive Furniture (2,949 tons) and the Catawba County Schools (2,253 tons). The remainder of the solid waste disposed of was divided by residential generators (27%) and construction and demolition (7%). Approximately 184,041 total tons of waste went into the Catawba County Landfill in 1996. The Solid Waste Management Plan (adopted by the County and each municipality) has targeted a reduction of more than 40,000 tons of solid waste by 2000-01 and an additional reduction of 52,734 tons by 2005-06. As described in that Plan there are a number of actions that have been put into motion to meet these goals.

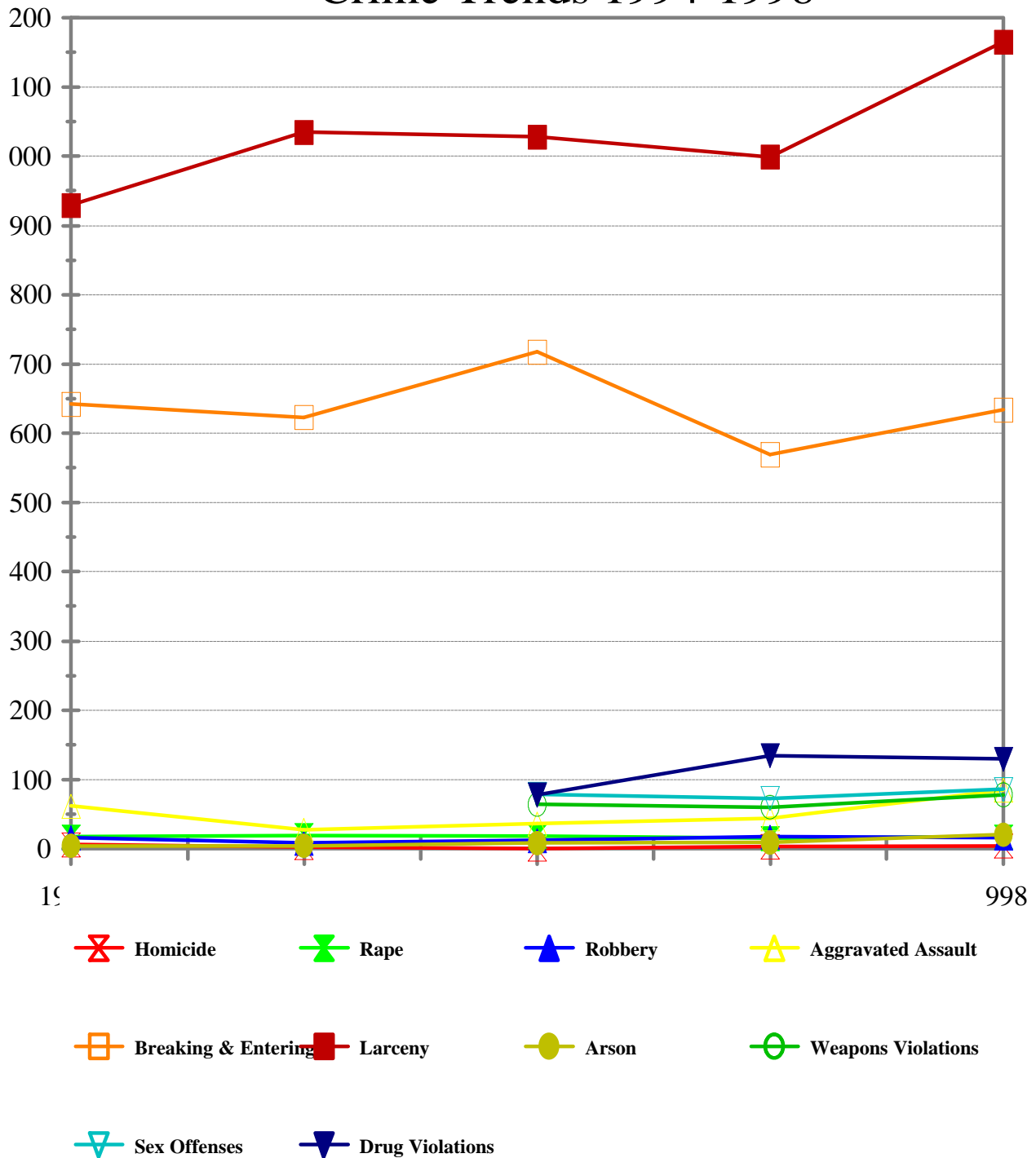
VisionQuest 2010 Applicability

The County’s Comprehensive Plan, VisionQuest 2010 describes the Public Services and Facilities Goal as follows: *“To ensure that needed public services and facilities will be provided in a manner which promotes orderly, compact, and efficient urban growth and serves as many residents as practical in a cost efficient manner.”* Generally, VisionQuest did not explore any specific public services other than those related to utilities, transportation, parks and recreation. However, there are certainly services other than these that are often vulnerable to the affects of growth and therefore will be explored fully as part of the implementation phase of this Plan.

VisionQuest also describes the Intergovernmental Relations Goal as follows: *“To foster an environment in which government planning efforts are coordinated with all other local, State and Federal government agencies to promote efficient service delivery.”* It also listed nine policies and five recommended actions specifically related to intergovernmental relations, all with the objective of improving service delivery. These have been addressed as part of the Growth Strategies Report.

Graph 6.1

Crime Trends 1994-1998



Graph 6.2

Arrests

